

# The Turkey Analyst

BI-WEEKLY BRIEFING

VOL. 2 NO. 12

19 JUNE 2009

## ANALYSIS:

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Halil M. Karaveli

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*Central Asia- Caucasus Institute*  
*Silk Road Studies Program*



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# THE TURKEY ANALYST

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# GENERAL STAFF WAGES TWO-FRONT BATTLE, AGAINST COUP PLOTTERS AND GÜLENISTS

*Halil M. Karaveli*

*Once again, commentators raise the question whether there is a risk of a military coup in Turkey. There is no reason at all to believe that the General staff entertains any such thoughts. However, recent developments have nevertheless provided a reminder that the military's position remains delicate. The Chief of the General staff, General Ilker Başbuğ, is in fact engaged in an awkward battle on two fronts, against old coup habits in the military, and against the challenge posed by the Islamic movement of Fethullah Gülen.*



**BACKGROUND:** The publication in the pro-government *Taraf* daily a fortnight ago of what was presented as a blueprint for a campaign that the military allegedly prepared to wage against the AKP government and against the Fethullah Gülen movement created furor and sowed new confusion in Turkish politics. The document published by the daily was recovered by the police at the offices of a solicitor arrested as a suspect in the Ergenekon coup conspiracy case. The document, entitled “A blueprint for the fight against religious reaction”, and signed by a colonel of the navy, outlines the details of an “agent provocateur”-operation

directed against the Governing party and the movement led by Islamic preacher Fethullah Gülen.

Accordingly, “agents” were to infiltrate the AKP and make statements intended to create the impression that the party is indeed bent on overthrowing secular rule; weapons would be smuggled into locations associated with the Fethullah Gülen brotherhood, making it possible to take action against the movement once it had been labeled a “terrorist organization”.

Although the document undeniably exists, its authenticity was instantly called into question. Apparently, the document recovered by the police is not an original, but a copy. That will complicate the task of establishing whether or not it is a forgery. Secularist-nationalist commentators and representatives of the opposition denounced the document as a forgery, suggesting that it had been “planted” by the police, which they suspect is under the control of the Gülen movement. Several pro-government commentators, on the other hand, were in turn quick to jump to the conclusion that the document beyond any doubt proves that the military indeed remains uncomfortable with



*Ilker Basbug*

democratic rule and continues to scheme against the popularly elected AKP government.

Evidently, the record of recent history is of a kind to make both versions sound reasonably plausible. Sufficient evidence has surfaced during the last year to support the conclusion that there are indeed those in the military who do scheme, or would be prepared to scheme, to bring about the overthrow of the government. The ongoing Ergenekon investigation has produced insights into the working of the military that are incriminating; high ranking military officers have, so it seems, been involved in internal conspiracies as well as in schemes against the government since 2003.

The fact that the General staff did advertise its displeasure with Abdullah Gül's election to the presidency in its infamous e-memorandum in April 2007 lends credibility to accusations leveled against the military for not abiding by the rules of

democracy. There can be no doubt that the officers in general harbor an ideologically motivated resentment against the AKP government. The records, again made public by the daily *Taraf*, of some of the regular national security meetings that have been held between the representatives of the government and the General staff since the AKP came to power in 2002 reveal how deeply

the government is mistrusted by the generals. Above all, the generals are wary that national unity, or more precisely Turkishness, would be endangered if too much emphasis is put on the Islamic identity of Turkey.

Meanwhile, it is also a fact that no military coup has taken place. The systematic leaks of materials from the Ergenekon investigation to AKP and Fethullah Gülen supporters in the media have contributed to creating the impression among the supporters of the secularist opposition that the revelations of supposed military conspiracies are intended only to smear the military. The authenticity of the latest, alleged coup document is thus easily called into the question.

**IMPLICATIONS:** Although the reactions, in particular in the media, have once again served to reveal Turkey as a sharply divided country – in its view of the AKP and of the military, respectively

– the government and the General staff have in fact been at pains to handle the latest crisis in conjunction. After an initial, harshly worded reaction immediately upon the publication of the blueprint, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan refrained from further enflaming the situation with harsh statements. The Chief of the General Staff, Ilker Başbuğ, ordered an investigation into the matter on the spot. Even though the military prosecutor was conspicuously quick to establish that the General staff had not been responsible for the blueprint, the authorities underlined that the investigation is to be further pursued under the joint auspices of civilian and military prosecutors. And General Başbuğ vehemently denied that the plan to undermine the government could have been made up at the General staff, deeming it “outrageous” to intimate such a possibility.

General Başbuğ has on other occasions recently made strongly worded statements about the military’s commitment to democracy. Notably, Başbuğ has forcefully stated that those who harbor designs against democracy have no place within the military. These statements, as well the way the Chief of the General staff has handled the latest, alleged coup plot revelation, suggest that Başbuğ is indeed firmly committed to play by the democratic rules and furthermore intent on routing any potential conspirators within the military. The fact that General Başbuğ deems it necessary to make such strongly worded declarations suggests that the high command is indeed seriously worried that a “suicidal” attempt could take place outside the chain of command.

Such an attempt would be suicidal as it would stand no chance of succeeding, and as it would be devastating for the public standing of the military. It is no coincidence that despite the great resentment and mistrust toward the AKP government harbored by the General Staff, no military coup has taken place. The evidence

suggests that not even those generals who are accused of having been involved in coup plots in 2003-2004 actually believed that their effort had any chance of being crowned with success. Nevertheless, in the ideologically charged atmosphere that reigns in the country, the military remains susceptible to manipulations.

Those who dismiss the alleged blueprint as a fabrication hold it to be improbable that any authentic coup plotters would have left any such evidence around, and as even less probable that they would have signed it. Yet, it has also been suggested that the document may be a proposal, intended to influence others in the military. It is not inconceivable that groups within the military, possibly in collusion with some retired officers, could be trying to force the hand of the General staff. Nor is it inconceivable that those who see the military as an obstacle in their way would deem it to be in their interest that the reputation of the armed forces is smeared.

The second front line on which General Ilker Başbuğ is engaged is against what is perceived to be the efforts of the Fethullah Gülen movement to secure a dominant position in the state, and notably to gain a foothold in the military. In a speech delivered at the War Academy in April, Başbuğ singled out the Gülen movement – which he referred to simply as “the cemaat” – as a challenge that he implied is going to be worn down.

Fethullah Gülen himself made a rare, public appearance – via a video message – after the disclosure of the alleged, military blueprint for action against the AKP and the Gülen movement. Speaking in a way that showed that he assumes that such a plan does exist, Gülen exhorted his followers to be undeterred, reminding them that the Prophet Muhammad and his followers had also faced similar efforts and had likewise not been deterred. It is indeed remarkable that Gülen places

the supposedly unpolitical struggle in which his movement is engaged in such historic-religious context. Fethullah Gülen also took care to remind his audience of the importance of safeguarding the standing of the military as an institution. However, Gülen is the “outsider” in Turkey’s power equation.

**CONCLUSIONS:** The General Staff and the AKP government handled the crisis over the incriminating blueprint in concert; Prime Minister Erdoğan and General Başbuğ effectively saw to it that the high ranks of the state, government and military were closed. That avoided the perception that the institutions of the state were battling each other. Yet, the specter of AKP-General staff cooperation, which has notably evolved in response to the challenge posed by the Kurdish issue, is also threatening for those who are left at the sidelines as a consequence.

Hard line secularist-nationalists will continue to have trouble accepting the accommodation of the



*Fethullah Gülen*

AKP, and could be enticed to try to force the hand of the General staff. Meanwhile, the Fethullah Gülen movement is sure to be wary of a cooperation that implies that it could be isolated. General Başbuğ has probably not fought off the last attempt to further particular ideological aims over the backs of the armed forces.

Halil M. Karaveli is Managing Editor of the *Turkey Analyst*.

# IRANIAN CRISIS CATCHES THE TURKISH GOVERNMENT OFF GUARD

*Svante E. Cornell*

*After two decades of deep tensions with Iran, the AKP government has largely rebuilt relations with Turkey's historical rival and neighbor. Yet its responses to the Iranian crisis – in which Prime Minister Erdoğan was embarrassingly among the first to congratulate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad upon his highly questionable re-election – appears to question the foundations of this rapprochement. Moreover, it indicates the limitations of Ankara's newly found “zero-problem” foreign policy, which appears to mean that Turkey has no opinions on the basis of either interests, values or principles in its neighborhood.*



**BACKGROUND:** Turkey and Iran share a long and intricate historical relationship, and the two former imperial powers have influenced each other significantly over centuries. In modern times, the Iranian monarchy emulated the secularizing reforms launched by Kemal Atatürk, inaugurating

a period of booming relations between the two western-aligned powers. That changed with the Islamic revolution of 1979, which shook the Turkish republic to the core.

As thousands of Iranians from the *ancien régime* fled to Turkey, where they were welcomed, various parts of the Turkish political scene drew various conclusions. The establishment, in the middle of a struggle with leftist and Kurdish-nationalist elements, was fearful of the prospect of a forceful Islamic reaction to the secular republic. The Iranian events may indeed have influenced the military leadership, once taking power in September 1980, to bring about the “Turkish-Islamic synthesis” that sought to internalize elements of Sunni Islam to strengthen national unity and fight communism. But it equally drove home the need to suppress Islamic extremism whenever it arose. The Iranian regime’s rogue tendencies made things worse: not only was the Islamic republic’s high-tone rhetoric one that undermined everything Kemalist Turkey stood for, its targeted assassinations of exiled Iranians in Turkey soured relations.

The burgeoning political Islamic movement in Turkey drew entirely different conclusions. To them, simply put, it became clear that they were not necessarily on the wrong side of history. The

Iranian revolution showed that secularizing states were not invincible, and that Islam could be turned into a powerful political mobilizing force. Importantly, their attitudes toward Iran began to change. Whereas the strongly Sunni Turkish Islamists had traditionally been prejudiced against the Shi'a militancy of their Iranian counterparts, such sentiments faded and even turned into admiration as they saw Iran turn into an Islamic republic. When Necmettin Erbakan became Turkey's first Islamist Prime Minister in 1996, Iran was one of his first foreign destinations.

It was thus natural that the AKP, with its roots in political Islam, would make the improvement of Turkey's ties to Iran a priority issue. It did so successfully, and was undeterred by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election in 2004. In 2008, The AKP government invited Ahmadinejad to visit Turkey – a visit that was quietly moved to Istanbul from Ankara after Ahmadinejad refused the traditional protocol of visiting Atatürk's mausoleum. The AKP not only indulged this caprice, but allowed Ahmadinejad to use a visit to the Blue Mosque to engage in an anti-American and anti-Israeli show.

Ties with Iran were also bolstered by mutual interests concerning Iraq, which both Ankara and Tehran want to maintain as a unitary state. Indeed, Tehran benefited greatly from



Washington's inability or unwillingness to support Turkey's efforts to eradicate PKK support bases in northern Iraq from 2003 to 2007. As Iran cracked down hard on the PKK's Iranian arm, PJAK, to most Turks the perverse reality was that Iran proved a better ally against terrorism than the United States.

**IMPLICATIONS:**  
Many world leaders have found it hard

to strike the right chord on dealing with the Iranian unrest. Even U.S. President Barack Obama finds himself under fire for his careful approach to the developments, although any greater American involvement would probably play into Ahmadinejad's hands. Nevertheless, Ankara's reaction amply illustrated the AKP government's quandary. Indeed, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan sent Ahmadinejad a warm letter of congratulation on his re-election, making him one of the first world leaders to do so. This move was clearly premature given the disputed character of the election and the unclear outcome of the intra-regime struggle that ensued.

Indeed, the government later had to backpedal as the crisis unfolded. Its official policy has now switched to terming the election an internal affair of Iran's – but Ankara still refrains from criticizing either the election or the violence employed against students and demonstrators by

Iran's ruling elite, stating mainly its hope that events "do not overshadow" the election that was held. Ankara thus departed not only from the policies of its western allies, which have leveled strong criticism against the credible evidence of electoral fraud, and especially at the lethal use of force against protestors: it differed also from the policies of most Middle Eastern governments, which have adopted a wait-and-see attitude.



The AKP government's policy fits well into the "zero-problem" policy with its neighbors that it has sought to establish since coming to power. But in this particular instance, even in the Middle Eastern context, it puts Turkey in alignment with the radical regimes such as Syria and Qatar, rather than with moderate governments across the Middle East. That is reminiscent of Turkey's position in the Gaza crisis several months ago, where Turkey again sided with the pro-Hamas regimes, led by Iran, rather than with the more balanced policies supported among other by Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

The AKP's inability to respond convincingly to the Iranian crisis is notable not only because it happens on the watch of a Minister of Foreign Affairs who is a Middle East specialist, Ahmet Davutoglu, but because it misses the opportunity to play a role in a crisis has such momentous

implications for Turkey. Indeed, the moderation of the Islamic republic, which opposition candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi has explicitly espoused, would greatly improve Turkey's regional environment. Not only would the looming threat of a confrontation between Israel and/or the United States and Iran recede, but the opportunities of building economic and energy ties between the West and Iran would grow considerably, opening up great potential for Turkish involvement.

For centrist Turks, the prospect of an Iranian regime that would reduce its sponsorship of terrorism and extremism abroad and that would play a more constructive role in regional affairs would make such an outcome an even greater benefit. So would the likely improvement of the plight of Turkic-speaking Iranians, primarily the Azerbaijanis, who form a great cultural and economic bridge between the two countries. Of course, Turkey's hardcore Islamists would likely see dangers in the Islamic republic's crisis. While Mousavi is no secularist, a *Perestroika* in the Islamic republic might advance the theocracy's in a manner similar to the reforms brought about by Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Union. That, in turn, could deflate the political Islamic movement in Turkey, which has been on the ascendancy since the mid-1970s.

On the other hand, if Ahmadinejad survives the crisis, he will do so as a deeply compromised and in many eyes illegitimate president, while the Iranian regime will have abandoned all pretenses to a democratic element and turned into an increasingly authoritarian and repressive theocracy. Ankara may in that scenario maintain an excellent relationship with the regime; but that short-term gain may be offset by the danger of losing influence in the country's future should the regime collapse in the medium term.



**CONCLUSIONS:** Ankara's reaction to the Iranian crisis is reminiscent of its disorganized and *ad hoc* handling of other recent crises, such as the Georgia war last August and the Gaza crisis a few months after that. There are, however, two more specific conclusions to be drawn. First, in spite of the benefits a moderation of the Iranian regime would bring for Turkey, the AKP government is no force for change in Iran, rather a force that by default supports the status quo. Indeed, the zero-problem policy has made Ankara

indifferent to the outcome of the power struggle in Tehran. That may avoid problems in the short term should the regime stand; but it would likely generate a whole set of difficulties and missed opportunities should it not.

Secondly, the response brings further question to the implications of the zero-problem policy itself, the brainchild of current Foreign Minister Davutoglu. This policy indeed dictates refraining from intervening in the affairs of Turkey's neighbors. But that also implies that Turkey has no opinion on developments in its neighbors' internal affairs, or on their system of government. Indeed, it makes Turkey a passive bystander to developments in its region, developments that have great impact on Turkey's own security and interests.

Svante E. Cornell is Research Director of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program Joint Center.

## WHAT THE COLUMNISTS SAY

*The confrontation between the Islamic conservative/liberal alliance and the nationalist-secularist camp continues to set the tone of Turkish politics. The funeral of Türkan Saylan, the founder of the secularist “Association for the defense of the modern way of life”, turned into a manifestation by the secularist opposition. The change of leadership in the Democratic party was widely interpreted as an attempt to revive a secularist center right alternative. While liberal and conservative commentators are worried that the secularist manifestation at Saylan’s funeral and the election of a new DP leader are part of the machinations of the Ergenekon organization, others see the former event as evidence that the attempts of Islamic conservative forces to incriminate all opposition is backfiring, and are hopeful about the prospects of a new center right.*

### CAKIR: THE ATTEMPT TO INCRIMINATE SAYLAN BACKFIRED

Rusen Cakir in *Vatan* writes that the funeral of Türkan Saylan became a powerful demonstration against those forces that had tried to incriminate her by including her in the Ergenekon investigation. By doing that, they only succeeded in enhancing her standing in society. In the end, the attempt by “a force” to criminalize Saylan’s “Association for the defense of the modern way of life” (which offers education opportunities for destitute children, not least girls) in order to monopolize the education sector backfired. The question is why that “force” failed to calculate what the effects would be, how it could commit such a strategic mistake. The answer to that question gives us a better appreciation of the players and their respective positions in the formidable power struggle that rages in our country. The fact that the neo-nationalist movement has failed to mobilize any significant support either inside the country or abroad, and has been hit hard by the

Ergenekon investigation, has emboldened its enemies. They have in short become overconfident. They have acquired the habit of including everyone they dislike politically in the coup plot case.

### CANDAR: QUO VADIS?

No one can doubt that Türkan Saylan was a very special person worthy of respect, writes Cengiz Candar in *Radikal*. But it is also a fact that her death has been used by those who seek to foment trouble. Saylan’s funeral was above all a manifestation against the Ergenekon investigation. The military top brass that were present was applauded and nationalist, Kemalist slogans were chanted. I don’t know if it’s really the case, but there is enough evidence to suggest that an Ergenekon cell may have gone active: The republican rallies gather again, artists and writers march in Istanbul, expressing solidarity with the Ergenekon detainees, and a court in Ankara has ruled that President Abdullah Gül will stand trial, accused of

“fraud”. Saylan’s funeral was the most impressive so far of the pro-Ergenekon manifestations. Could it be that we are headed towards a great misfortune, with the forces behind these machinations organizing mass killings and other atrocities? Quo Vadis?

### ALTAN: THE LOOMING DANGER

Ahmet Altan in *Taraf* warns of a looming danger: the attempts to use the law against the AKP are being revived. The secularist rallies have started again. The masses that gather at these rallies do not constitute the majority, but they represent a quarter of the population. It is a significant minority that can be exploited and manipulated by the Ergenekon conspiracy. There may be massacres and other atrocities ahead. The only force that can prevent such a development is the AKP. The AKP can and should act in a way that assuages the worried, urban secular middle class. These people are genuinely worried that the secular way of life is threatened. They risk being used by the Ergenekon conspirators, who in fact do not care so much about any threat against secularism as they feel threatened by the AKP’s efforts to bring Turkey closer to the West and the European Union. However, the conservative policies that are implemented at municipal level by AKP mayors create the impression that the party has indeed trouble with the modern way of life. If the AKP succeeds in dispelling that impression, and if it revives its EU-oriented efforts, then the Ergenekon conspiracy will lose its popular base. Otherwise, I fear that we are headed toward trouble. And this time, it’s going to hit us really hard.

### SAHIN: WHY ARE THEY SO BOTHERED BY THE DP?

Haluk Sahin in *Radikal* notes that the leadership change in the Democratic party has provoked negative comments from liberal and conservative quarters. For years, they had nothing but praise for Süleyman Demirel; now they are harshly critical of him. Why? DP is a small party, to which they had paid little attention until now. How come they are now all worked up? It is because the attempt to revive the center-right poses a potential threat to the AKP. Voters seldom change political camps, they change parties within the same camp; that means that the conservative Felicity party and a center-right party are going to be the very likely alternatives for voters who are dissatisfied with the AKP. Can DP become the center-right alternative? It might. That is why the attempt to revive its fortunes causes such consternation among those liberals who have invested heavily in their mutually beneficial relationship with the AKP.

### AKYOL: DEMIREL AND CINDORUK DON'T STAND A CHANCE

Taha Akyol in *Milliyet* argues that Süleyman Demirel and Hüsametdin Cindoruk do not stand a chance of success. The center-right that Demirel claims to represent was always close to the people. The Justice party (that Demirel headed) of the 1960s was not the party of the state. But Demirel and Cindoruk abandoned the traditions of the center-right in 1997, when they conspired to bring down the coalition government of Necmettin Erbakan. And did they side with the people in 2007, when the military issued its e-

memorandum, when obstacles were laid out against the election of Abdullah Gül as president? It is the fact that it stands close to the people that explains the success of the AKP. Cindoruk is sure to get some headlines, but he will never succeed in transforming the DP into a party with a mass following.

### CEMAL: DEMIREL HAS DISAPPOINTED ME

Hasan Cemal in *Milliyet* expresses his disappointment with Süleyman Demirel. Despite having been deposed by the military twice, Demirel never challenged the red lines of the regime of military stewardship. He has

represented a conservatism which always had a restricted understanding of democracy, which never bothered to defend the rights of those who dissented from its own views. But it is the Demirel of the last decade that has disappointed me the most. I had expected him to become the wise man of Turkish politics; instead, he joined the ranks of those who have tried to prevent the dream of EU membership becoming reality, who have been busy throwing up barriers for instance to a solution of the Cyprus issue. And finally, he has sided with Ergenekon. Now, Demirel is trying to get control of the Democratic party. How can you reconcile militarism and Ergenekonism with democracy?